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ABSTRACT

Like Antarctica, the fields of cross- and intercultural communication are claimed by many, explored by not so many, and understood by perhaps rather few. The most popular references in this area reflect a "maximalist" perspective, generally cross-cultural, which advocates the view that culture is a monolithic and static entity and that people's culture will largely determine their way of interacting with others. A "minimalist" perspective, largely intercultural, allows a greater focus to be placed on the individual and the situation. In their pursuit of descriptions of socio-cultural knowledge in intercultural communication, researchers from different disciplines have approached the area from different angles and some may have fallen victim to myopia resulting from ethnocentricity and ideological self-fulfillment. Four broadly delimited fields characterize present research interests: communication science, social psychology, anthropological linguistics, and sociolinguistics. The pursuit of problem identification and the desire to forward means for problem solution have resulted in a heavy focus on communication breakdown as opposed to communication success. Researchers are faced with a dilemma--they must deal with and explain systematic intercultural differences, but they also have to study each interaction as a separate achievement on its own. Situational adaptability is a means to raise the level of intercultural communication to a higher level of empirical validation and relevance to real people in a real world. An approach to intercultural communication as pertaining to situational parameters is both overdue and promising. (Contains 70 references.) (Author/RS)

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Minimalism vs. Maximalism in Intercultural Research and Training

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Abstract

Like Antarctica, the fields of cross- and intercultural communication are claimed by many, explored by not so many, and understood by perhaps rather few. It is an area with riches that lie largely undisturbed though tapped for centuries by people from a variety of backgrounds and academic disciplines, often with quite different intentions. Needless to say it has a long line of victims in its wake.

The present Western 'cross-cultural blitzkrieg' which has largely been in response to rapid internationalization and transnationalization of organizations, has introduced some pitfalls which may be adversely affecting intercultural communication training in business and management.

The most popular references in this area tend to reflect a 'maximalist' perspective, generally cross-cultural, which advocates the view that culture, and thus a person's cultural heritage and world-view, is a monolithic and static entity and that a person's culture will largely determine his/her way of interacting with others. Yet the world of human interaction involves people continuously engaging in interpretation of meaning which is itself constantly subject to evolution and change. Thus a person's repertoire of communicative styles is not static but subject to change, particularly in terms of situational adaptability.

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A 'minimalist' perspective, largely intercultural, allows greater focus to be placed on the individual and the situation. It is the notion of situational analysis which is of greater hands-on value to the manager for enhancing intercultural communication performance, than, for example, the comparison of nation states, speech communities or ethnic groups. 'Situational adaptability' is used to describe the optimum types of knowledge and skills that a person should possess in order to function as effectively in intra- as in intercultural encounters.

This paper presents some evidence of how the notion of interculturalism has been adversely affected by such influences as ethnocentricity, research methodology myopia, and pseudo-scientific commentary. The maximalist-minimalist distinction is described and the qualities of situational adaptability outlined. Situational adaptability is based on the premise that people adapt - or at least try to adapt- to the situation, to each other, and that success or failure is always the result of situated action and human intention.

Introduction

'Communication' and 'culture' are elusive terms. Thus, when we bind and extend them to produce 'intercultural communication', we are doing ourselves and others a disservice unless we offer a reasonable explanation of what the terms signify, how they are manifest, and what relevance they offer to the fields of intercultural research and training.

The construct of culture can only be made meaningful and operational by the identification of different approaches to understanding the phenomenon. However, such a task is made difficult by its sheer complexity. In order to transcend the rather narrow disciplinary frames adopted by many individual writers in this area, it may be of interest to briefly review what certain authors can offer on culture as a construct.

Approaching Culture

The animal which survives as a solitary figure is exceptional. Most animals live in groups. A large proportion of animal, including human, behaviour takes place in groups

for both the benefit of and sometimes to the detriment of the individual animal and other members of the social group. A group may be large or small. It may function for a few minutes or many centuries. It may exist to live in harmony with its environment or to fulfil destructive ambitions.

The term 'group' is thus as elusive as that of 'culture'. Observable social behaviour differs according to the orientation and raison d'être of a particular group, and the place of any given individual with respect to other members. One way to examine this behaviour has been to consider the social interaction which occurs when members of a group use sequences of verbal and nonverbal behaviour to fulfil their respective aims. These aims are biological in origin, but their achievement is essentially social. The biological aims, such as access to nutriments, defence from hostile predators and environment, and procreation, lead to the development of recurring patterns of behaviour which enable the members of a group to function as a whole in satisfying their individual and group needs. These collections of patterns of behaviour, which are the result of the operation of intertwined individual personality and group characteristics can reasonably be called 'culture(s)'.

Just as the human being has evolved from survival-linked developmental stages such as 'hunting and gathering', so individual and group characteristics, 'cultures', have also usually gradually changed to fulfil the needs of differing circumstances. One distinctive way in which human cultures have evolved has been in the ability to retain knowledge through the development of language. This is not to imply that other animals do not develop systems of language, but merely to acknowledge that human language has developed to such an extent that cultures, through the formation of multivarious groups, have also become multiplex.

The human behaviour resulting from the social interaction which occurs in groups is essentially social. This social behaviour is often said to be non-verbal with respect to animals, and both non-verbal and verbal with respect to humans. Whereas non-verbal behaviour in social interaction, thus named non-verbal communication, may be auditory,

olfactory, tactile and visual, verbal communication involves speech, the verbal manifestation of language. When we consider speech as it occurs within a specific group, namely 'intragroup' speech, what is of interest to those examining the social aspects of behaviour is how the given speech affects the behaviour of those involved in a situation. Thus, 'intergroup' speech, namely that which occurs when a member of one group uses talk to communicate with a member of another group, may be of interest in terms of how a representative of one group 'communicates' with those of others. If we accept that the group possesses a set of behavioural patterns specific to itself which comprises the group's 'culture', then intergroup communication can be understood as 'intercultural communication', a term introduced by Hall (1959).

Before briefly commenting on differing definitions of culture it may be worthwhile to introduce the work of Giovanni Batista Vico, whose essays, as interpreted by Isaiah Berlin (1976, 1992), have considerable bearing on the alternative approaches to interculturalism discussed in this paper.

For Berlin, Vico offers a comprehensive means for understanding alien cultures. Vico, who was born in 1668, 'virtually invented a new field of social knowledge, which embraces social anthropology, the comparative and historical studies of philology, linguistics, ethnology, jurisprudence, literature, mythology, in effect the history of civilisation in the broadest sense.' (Berlin 1976:4).

Berlin argues that Vico contributed seven essential notions which can, on the basis of his 1976 essay, be summarized as follows:

1. The nature of man is neither static nor unaltered. People constantly interpret the events surrounding them, which means that both their worlds, and they themselves, are in a state of constant change.
2. The people directly involved with a cultural situation can understand it in ways in which observers cannot.
3. There is a dualism between the natural sciences and the humanities which hinges on self-understanding and observation of the external world.

4. There are recurring patterns reflected in thought, language, social institutions, ways of life and action, which contribute to the notion of culture. However, one group of people do not share one culture, but many, simultaneously. A degree of self-awareness is required to make the patterns realised by these cultures intelligible to different people and the patterns inherent in social life rest on human universal values, but not universal human nature.

5. What is created within a society, such as laws, realisations, myths, and the like, are natural forms of expression and communication with other human beings or deities, which reflect world views.

6. All meaningful understanding and interpretation must be context-bound.

7. In addition to a priori-deductive and a posteriori-empirical types of knowledge, there is a need for 'reconstructive imagination'. On this final point Berlin argues that 'This type of knowledge is yielded by entering the mental life of other cultures, into a variety of outlooks and ways of life which only the activity of fantasia - imagination - make possible'. For Vico, fantasia represents the means by which we perceive social change, which is never-ending, and which is an expression of human behaviour.

Further reference to the work of Vico is outside the scope of this paper, but if one considers modern developments in the study of intercultural communication, it is possible that the audacious and profound ideas disseminated by Vico during the early 1700s, will become fundamental influences on achieving greater understanding of this area.

The 'culture' in Interculture

In order to move towards an understanding of the notion of culture and, in particular, its relationship to language, it is necessary to make certain basic distinctions in order to identify those aspects of the kaleidoscopic actions and reactions which can reasonably be called 'culture'.

Behaviours, products and ideas, are three aspects of culture which feature in contemporary descriptions of culture (see Robinson 1985). Whereas behaviours and

products may be considered observable, ideas are regarded as internal and thus not visible. Synthesising culture into three notions necessitates exclusion of a range of features said to be included under the term, such as cognitive processes, symbolic interactionism, and the like. Essentially, however, we may suggest that in terms of human language, thus the verbal and non-verbal means for engaging in intercultural communication, it is behaviour, rather than products and ideas, which can usefully be approached as a specific element in social interaction.

This involves compromise, because it is essential that we agree on certain basic schema with which to approach culture, prior to attempting to probe any part of its whole. This is always the case with scientific investigation, but as culture and 'intercultural' are so widely used, for very different purposes, about diverse phenomena, it is essential that there is some element of agreement on a definition of certain principles, whether they be provable or not, before engaging in research and training in this area.

If we examine an approach towards definitions of the essential elements of culture in the framework provided by, for example, Robinson (1985), it is possible to differentiate certain views of culture, and examine those which are the most valuable for the study of intercultural communication. Accepting that Seelye (1978) is partially right in arguing for compromise when stating that 'I know of no way to better ensure having nothing productive happen than for (us) to begin (an) approach to culture by a theoretical concern for defining the term', it is obvious that to avoid any attempt at definition, is to invite not merely disparagement but also to sow the seeds of confusion.

Let us consider a variety of definitions without attempting to place them within a taxonomy of perspectives. For Marx and Engels (1970) 'as people express their lives, so they are; Hall (1959) suggests that 'culture is the sum total of a way of life of a people'; Redfield (1966) argues that culture is 'an organisation or integration of conventional understandings'; Lado (1957) discusses the 'ways of a people... with structured systems for patterned behaviour'; 'all those historically created designs for living, explicit and implicit, rational, irrational, and non-rational, which exist at any

given time as potential guides for the behaviour of man' is proposed by Kluckhohn and Kelly as quoted by Hoijer (1953) who, himself, observes that this definition entails that 'traits, elements or patterns of culture... are organised or structured into a system or set of systems, which, because it is historically created is therefore open and subject to constant change (quoted in Valdes 1986:53). Hofstede (1991: 5) suggests that 'culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another'; Kulick (1992) offers us the cyclical concept of 'culture shapes practice/talk which shapes culture'.

The list is seemingly endless, for even by the early 1950s anthropologists found they needed to consider more than 200 different definitions of the term (see Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952).

Now, it may be opportune to ask at this point where this wide variety of approaches to the same term, if not the same phenomenon, leads us. We may usefully consider Kulick (1992:143) here who suggests: 'Culture is difficult to pin down and slippery to apply. Even though the concept as most of us use it today originated within the discipline of anthropology, anthropologists are still debating about what culture is, where culture is located (is it in people's heads or embodied in shared symbols?) and, most recently, whether culture as a concept has any value at all'. It is obvious that the magnitude of what is evidently the totality of culture, including its sister-concepts such as 'civilisation' or 'neosis', defies categorisation. And finally, as succinctly put by Kroeber (1964), when we consider language are we talking of 'language and culture or language in culture?"

One may opt for either and still accept that language is a highly discernible feature within culture. This is so, because regardless of one's specific interpretation of culture, both language and culture share one fundamental tenet, namely meaning.

Culture & the Nation State

The linguistic anthropological tradition that evolved towards description of language as it is used in cultures shifted towards examining the 'correlated communication matrix'

(see Gumperz 1982) which is a blend of the structural entities of a language, its pragmatic functioning systems and the larger sociocultural context including historical development. The term 'ethnography of speaking' (see Hymes 196-4) was used to describe the recurring linguistic and cultural habits of a given community and later the term 'ethnography of communication' was adopted (see Gumperz & Hymes 1972) to refer to the same notion that socio-linguistic behaviours are essentially pre-patterned and culturally dependent.

A fundamental feature of this approach was to take a speech community, that is a group of speakers who share 'knowledge of the communicative constraints and options governing a significant number of social situations' (Gumperz & Hymes 1972:16), and view this group as a fundamental cultural entity. An alternative approach is offered by Sherzer (1974) who opted for a definition of speech community as that which is a functional group which may be diverse in many respects but which is bound together in pursuit of common aims and norms. As noted by Hymes (1972:54) the speech community may have differing beliefs and behaviour but this variation 'shows systematic regularities at the statistical level of social facts'.

The ethnography of speaking requires that geographical or language-specific boundaries cannot be equated with the speech community. Thus, areas of the world in which people live together, because of political decision-making or ethnic identity, are not viewed as providing adequate grounds for describing cultural groups or the intercultural communication in which participants in these groups may engage themselves.

Even the geographical location in which a certain language is spoken and its grammatical rules are shared, may not be adequate in explaining intercultural communication to any great depth. For example, even defining what comprises a specific language, a dialect of that language or an alternative language, is viewed rather differently by various groups. This is all the more so with an area as complex as interlanguage and intercultural description. Homogeneity is always a relative term and the assumption that human populations may be classified into internally homogeneous

units is highly questionable. Even if it was the case at some point in the development of human communities it can hardly be seen to be so in the present stage of the history of the world where geographical isolationism from large centres of population no longer necessarily entails socio-cultural isolationism.

In much research on language and culture it is evident that speech communities are described not only in terms of specific recognised languages but also nation states. Admittedly there is value in some such descriptions and the key difference between cross-cultural communication description (namely, comparing cultures) and intercultural communication research (comparing individuals within cultures according to situational and functional group membership e.g. Wallace 1966) is important to note here.

Thus, we are faced with the top-down approach in which the starting point is the culture or more often, the nation state, and the bottom-up approach which starts with context and moves towards individuals as they perform in that context.

The notion of nation state frequently distorts culture by homogenizing it, which may be useful in certain applications, but which, equally may denigrate the behaviours of some of the complex groups of individuals who form interlocked groups and who happen to reside within the borders of one nation state or another. This may appear obvious, yet the field of intercultural communication has attracted considerable attention from those who belittle the complexities ot 'knowledge of the world... (which) varies from person to person, from subgroup to subgroup, from region to region (and) according to age and sex and experience and perspective' (Keesing 1981:72).

We have a situation in which the birth of the modern nation state, the outcome of the Peace of Westphalia at the end of the Thirty Years War, is frequently given conceptual importance which may hinder our understanding within the fields of intercultural

communication[1]. Cultural unification is always preferable to cultural diffusion if one wishes to compare the behaviours of cultures, but the nation state, like that of ethnic group, frequently results in myopic vision which clouds, rather than enhances, our understanding of differences in cultural behaviour. If we pursue the reasons why so many researchers and commentators have continued to employ such basic and impervious categories for human groups, then we face the plethora of difficulties which surround the definition of the term 'culture' as discussed above.

What is now valuable within the field of interculturalism in general is to move in the direction of viewing the individual as an entity separate from his/her cultural identity and ultimately, his/her national state identity. Essentially, this can be done by examining situations from the point of 'languaculture', a term introduced by Friedrich (1989). Languaculture brings together language and culture to offer an alternative view of intercultural behaviour which focusses on the complex phenomenon that any individual is in a given situation[2].

Culture & Personality

To some extent the reason why it is necessary to comment on the relationship between culture and personality at this stage is similar to that argued above on the significance of the role of the nation state in work on this field.

The approaches to language and culture have generally fallen into three categories; they focus on the event, the mind or both together. The sociological tradition has been most closely associated with the unity of the event. The psycholinguistic tradition has focussed on the individual, personality, and understanding and interpretation as a cognitive process. The combining of the event and the individual's personality, falls into

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[1] Casmir (1991) provides an insightful essay on the relationship between culture, communication and education.

[2] See Agadir (1992), Resaldo (1989), Hannerz (1992), for discussion on alternative approaches to culture which diminish the significance of nation state.

the domain of the interactional approach as discussed by Cicourel, Garfinkel, Goffman and Gumperz, amongst others. In modern sociolinguistics, and especially pragmatics, the lines drawn between language, culture and personality have become less clearly defined. What has become obvious in much writing on this area, however, is that whereas 'cultures' per se have been widely described in terms of differences, personalities of people within cultural groups have been widely assumed to be similar. If this were not the case, then cross- and inter-cultural research reports would not have largely ignored the diffusion of personality and personality-types which is evident in human groups.

Keesing (1992: 2) mentions 'irresponsibility, selective use of evidence, mistranslation, misinterpretation and serious overstatement' in his discussion on cultural diversity which advocates that there is a far greater similarity of human behaviour across cultures than is readily admitted in the literature (specifically that of anthropology) and that this is often due to ideological reasons.

What is interesting in this type of counter-approach to the study of human groups is that it forces a retreat from maximalist notions of language or culture groups, towards, at the very least, a serious consideration and acceptance of the significance of personality. That there exists a 'substratum of human universals' (Keesing 1992:29) which constitutes a foundation of human commonality which, in turn, manifests itself in myriad cultural forms is an attitude which is rapidly gaining interest through the notion of 'situational complexity' which allows for greater acknowledgement of the existence and influence of personality factors in intercultural communication.

Bourdieu (1977) and Foucault (1972) should both be recognised as offering a means for accounting for personality differences within cultural groups. Bourdieu's (1977:76) concept of 'habitus' (a socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures) and Foucault's (1972:49) definition of discourse as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' are both, in the words of Kulick (1992:146) concerned with 'practice... with what people do...(and they both) highlight recursivity. .. langue, the underlying system of rules and generalizations, which does not

only influence and shape parole, actual speech, as de Saussure held to be the case, and as Chomsky maintains with his distinction between competence and performance. Parole, speech, the practice, also influences and shapes langue, the generative system itself.'

Thus, if we view practice as constituting culture then we may usefully turn to the situation for enquiry into intercultural communication which avoids any disservice to language, culture or personality. As Leontiev (1992:193) suggests '...first of all personality is socially/culturally determined, its essence is social'. This follows from the discussion of personality by Vygotsky (1929) in which personality is defined as a psychological phenomenon which has priority over others such as activity or consciousness. Leontiev (1992) argues that the personality-culture-language paradigm is heavily influenced by an interiorization process' in which human behaviour is culturally determined, and in which, to refer to Blommaert (1988), cultural determinism overrides other explanations for what occurs in intercultural communication. Figures such as Vygotsky, Leontiev and Bakhtin are brought together by Leontiev (1992:194) for one purpose; namely to argue for the re-establishment of personality in the explanation of what happens in human communication. Personality is self-determinism and as Leontiev (ibid.) observes 'culture is the generalization of some traits of different personalities, but a generalization of the same kind as personality'.

Thus, we come to the view that culture in communication is rarely a homogeneous phenomenon. Rather it manifests itself in different forms, for different purposes in different situations. The assumption made in this paper is that one aspect of intercultural communication is the fundamental assumption that 'culture' will be present and that it may bear influence on the outcome of communicative situations. This assumption is made whilst acknowledging that the individual's personality will also be a significant factor, in its own right, which requires consideration, and which posits the autonomy of the individual as a communicator.

Situational Adaptability

It was suggested above that the differences between intracultural and intercultural behaviour may be less significant than is widely claimed to be the case in the literature on this field. In order to explore this premise further deeper we may consider the notion of situational adaptability.

Brislin (1981:51) argues that culture refers to aspects of a society that members share and that personality refers to 'unique combinations of traits... which differentiate individuals within a culture'. Intercultural communication involves both of these and language, which in Hoftstede's (1991) terms, may be thought of as a vehicle for transferring, interpreting and creating meaning. Thus it is a form of social activity between human beings where to quote Leontiev (1992:197) 'culture is function, not substance'. Here we may return to Kulick's (1992:147) dictum that 'culture shapes practice/talk which shapes culture' and move away from seeing culture per se as peripheral to the study of language. For this we can usefully consider the situation in which the social activity occurs.

One advantage of the recent development of interculturalism as an interdisciplinary field has been the coming together of different academic disciplines such as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and anthropolinguistics[3], to name but a few, in forms of enquiry into human behaviour as it is manifest in situations. Morris (1938:30) defines pragmatics as 'the biotic aspects of semiosis, that is, all the psychological, blological, and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs, and the arenas in which these signs are used are the situations of human life'. Within these situations, people employ what have been termed 'situated interpretations' (see Hymes 1364) which are judgements of intent which serve as input for what speakers want to achieve in human interaction. These involve reliance on everyday knowledge which is acquired through common tradition and shared experience. Thus, situational or contextual interpretation involves

[3] One could easily add other categories or subcategories to this list. See Östman 1988 for a brief but thorough treatise on this question. In addition Vershueren (1987), Blommaert (1988) and Mey (1988) are of considerable interest.

a person using various resources, some of which may be influenced by socio-cultural background, others by personality, yet others by factors such as intelligence, levels of fatigue, and the like. The person does not enter a given situation in vacuo. On the contrary, a multitude of different psychological, sociological and biological factors will be in operation there.

The use of the notion of situational adaptability, linked as it is to a Darwinian sense of evolving means for handling those situations which one faces, is closely linked to what has been termed 'linguistic adaptation' (see Verschueren 1987:45) which involves 'adaptation from language to circumstances and from circumstances to language at the same time'. Thus it involves a constantly changing adaptation to many facets of a situation, for example, the beliefs and apparent wishes of other interlocutors, the politeness strategies introduced, physical constraints such as time, and the like. Situational adaptability is similar to the notion of linguistic adaptation, but, as a term, is more readily accessible. Ostman (1988:11) comments that adaptation is 'a response to the pressure that the environment exerts on things and bodies in nature' which links adaptation directly to Darwin's evolutionary theory and which confirms the inseparability of language and communication whilst stressing the dynamism of human interaction.

In situations in which humans interact, such as those of intercultural communication, we can see that ambiguity or discrepant information is likely to figure to a greater or lesser degree. Ambiguity is often the essence of human communication, and fundamental to politeness behaviour. In responding to a range of situations in which signs or cues are not wholly familiar, we may assume that a person draws on various forms of knowledge and skill to determine how best to proceed, if to proceed at all, in the given situation. Östman (1988:13) comments that s/he would have to adapt 'to the situation, take contextual information into account, and re-evaluate... sources of sensory information'.. This notion of the person actively interpreting and manipulating the interplay and outcome(s) of human communication is fundamental to the concept of situational adaptability. The value of using the notion of situational adaptability in intercultural

research is that we do not separate intracultural and intercultural communication phenomena. Such delimitation of interest is frequently vague, and as we have noted above often made on the basis of spurious definitions of nation state and ethnicity, amongst others.

The term 'maximalist' is used by Blommaert (1988) to refer explicitly to approaches within intercultural communication which advocate the view that 'a person's culture will always determine his way of interacting with others'. Thus, if we were to accept the premise, from a maximalist perspective, that 'Russians are x and y but not z', then, possibly inadvertently, we claim that culture is somehow beyond management, or argue against the notion that the individual has the ability to autonomously step outside his cultural persona and act accordingly.

Such a maximalist view of differences in the means for establishing, developing and maintaining optimum interpersonal relations in human interaction may provide clarity but at the cost of encouraging a form of cultural myopia. In Blommaerts words, 'the maximalist approach is implicitly ethnocentric' because it creates a monolithic and static picture of culture and the individuals who are representatives of a given culture' (1988: 62).

In widely-used intercultural communication surveys and inventories, we may sometimes find that questions are couched so as to invite a utopia-oriented response. In other words, the question "All people, of whatever race, are equally valuable - yes/no" (Kelley & Meyers 1992) could, depending on the translator's inference, easily invite a positive answer on the basis of respondent acquiescence. Such surveys may have their value when used in training situations, but it is in their application in comparing people from different ethnic/national backgrounds, that they become highly problematic.

Thirdly, the maximalist view packages information in such an accessible form, that it gives the ill-founded impression that those people who are within the Western communicative domain and who have insight into the maximalist world view, can thus

be considered more advanced than the non-westerners who may, quite unwittingly, be considered as communicating on a 'less sophisticated level' (cf. Glenn 1981.)

A predominantly minimalist situational approach to intercultural communication takes into account the following assumptions: that there may be a blending of two or more significantly different styles; conceptualization processes may differ; interlanguage may interfere with communication processes; all intercultural communication takes place in situations which may have a marked effect on the character and outcome of the communication; the concept of intercultural communication is often used to confirm or support prejudiced or stereotyped imagery.[4]

In the dynamic and interwoven fabric of much human communication which some mlght argue is always intercultural (see Tannen 1988) three faces of culture may be identified within intercultural communication. A description of these may be found in Blommaert (1988:63-64). In summary, he observes that culture-specific styles of communication are 'generally stable and reflect possible differences of conceptualization in the language realization of communication'. Secondly, that 'interlocutors engage in mutual accommodation of each other's communicative styles and that in the pursuit of cooperation, speakers' select from their potential for communication these features which can, within the situation, lead to communicative success, and suppress others that can lead to communication breakdown' (ibid.) Thirdly, culture becomes the argument by which people attempt to interpret the world around them, frequently resulting in impoverished desision-making manifest in prejudiced and antagonistic appraisal and discourse. To these three we may also add a fourth, 'face', which B1ommaert refers to as 'situation-dependency'. He observes that 'discourse-internal... developments develop within the limits imposed by the "culture" of the interlocutors. Therefore, an analysis of intercultural communication should be a situational analysis, which could follow the

[4] See Blommaert (1988) for a discussion of intercultural communication and objects of adaptation.

interactional pattern developed in studies such as Gumperz (1982), and which is implicit in Vershueren's delineation of the "objects of adaptation".'

There is considerable interest in returning to context, as opposed to function, in the field of intercultural study, and the need for this is interestingly raised by Scarcella (1983) who set out to challenge the assumptions of many writers in this field, who suggest that 'interethnic communications would be more prone to communication breakdown than communication between people of the same ethnic group'. (cf. Singh et al. 1988:49). Scarcella (1983:310) found that this could not be seen to be the case and that 'Rather, they only seemed to appear in situations in which participants lacked shared background knowledge'. Furthermore, Scarcella examined abrupt topic shift, said to be a signal of interethnic communication difficulties, and concludes that these were 'more characteristic of people who had little in common, whether of differing backgrounds or not' (ibid.) These findings lay the ground for the development of the major focus on situational concerns which, as is suggested here, is increasingly going to be of major influence in enabling the field of intercultural communication to achieve greater maturity.

In summary, four fundamental issues need to be given consideration in order to allow for greater understanding of situational adaptability. These are as follows:

1. To what extent is miscommunication the result of speakers' adherence to automatic culture-specific patterns and conventions?
2. To what extent is conversational co-operation a matter of skills, to what extent is it unconscious and automatic, either dependent on culture-specific factors or unobservable personality factors?
3. If acculturation is the result of long-term contact and exposure to particular socialisation processes, to what extent is it possible to learn a new communicative system and through that a new culture and what are the conditions required for this to happen?
4. What is the role of a person's identity in the process of learning if we assume that any change in the discourse system is likely to be felt as a change in personality and culture?

Conclusion

As we have seen, language in its socio-cultural context is an object of interdisciplinary study which is without fixed boundaries or stable definitions. Within this area of language study cross- and intercultural communication have attracted considerable interest because it is here that the role of sociocultural knowledge has been regarded as most visible, and hence open to analysis.

In their pursuit of descriptions of socio-cultural knowledge in intercultural communication, researchers from different disciplines have approached the area from different angles and some may have fallen victim to myopia resulting from ethnocentricity and ideological self-fulfilment. As Keesing (1992:2) notes in a critique of anthropological interests in this area 'we have done our job well, it would seem, in conveying to our colleagues in other disciplines the idea of extreme cultural differences'. The pursuit of difference may have clouded the recognition of similarity and crucially, the sense of mutual accommodation, which occurs when people who are cooperative, communicate with one another. Put simply, differences pose problems which deserve solutions within the classical problem-solution-evaluation framework upon which Western philosophy and Enlightenment rationalism[5] resides (see Ralson-Paul 1992). Thus our academic ideological interests may serve to justify our means and ends, which, in turn, may do little to clarify what actually happens in forms of intercultural communication.

Four broadly delimited fields are said to characterize present research interests (see Coupland 1991). These are those of communication science (see, e.g. Kim & Gudykunst 1988); social psychology(see, e.g. Giles 1984); anthropological linguistics (Firth 1957) and sociolinguistics (see Gumperz & Hymes 1972). Although reflecting broadly different

[5] A classic example is the discovery of 'Eden' in Pacific islands such as Tahiti, to serve Enlightenment Europe's need to identify human societies which existed according to Rousseau's 1749 Discours sur les Arts et Sciences (see Smith 1992). For a modern academic reaction against such assertions of ethnocentricity and research methodology myopia consider the reaction to Freeman's (1983) attempt to refute Margaret Mead's description of adolescent sexuality in Samoa.

interests and foci, it is perhaps ironic that where they tend to become less fragmented and more unified is in the problems which their respective approaches raise, rather than in the findings upon which they report.

The degree of ethnocentricity which has affected numerous examples of work in this field (see Glenn 1981) has often appeared not so much because of a desire to assert the supremacy of one cultural entity over another, but rather because of research approaches which have reflected Western traditions which may be to the detriment of establishing reality, and thus, truth. To some extent this has occured because of a neglect of, or scant regard for, the actual situations in which people find themselves communicating and actively creating as they weave the fabric of their interaction.

In addition, what is frequently cited as linguistic evidence for miscommunication[6] may, as pointed out by Singh et al. (1988), in fact be a violation of the cooperative principles of discourse and human interaction (Grice 1975), the Principle of Charity (Davidson 1974), and the Principle of Humanity (Grandy 1973). In other words, what is assumed to be miscommunication caused by differences of intercultural communication procedures may simply be a question of participants exerting hegemony and dominance.

The pursuit of problem identification and the desire to forward means for problem solution have resulted in a heavy focus on communication breakdown as opposed to communication success. It is particularly noticeable that few studies set out to observe or even note communication success or those intercultural factors which may lead to the enhancement of intercultural relations. Analysis done on Greek and New York Jewish speakers (Tannen 1979, 1981, 1986); North American black communities (Kochman 1981); Indians (Gumperz 1982); Germans (House & Kasper 1981, Byrnes 1986); Russians (Thomas 1983); and Japanese (LoCastro 1987) all testify to this fact (see Coupland, Giles & Wiemann 1991).

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[6] A powerful critique of the idealism of much intercultural research which questions the findings of a range of contemporary figures such as Cook-Gumperz, Clyne, Gumperz, Morris, Tannen, Scancella, amongst others, can be found in Singh, Lele & Martohardjono (1988).

An exception is Johnstone (1986) which describes the almost total breakdown in communication between the Italian journalist Oriana Fallachi and the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini. This interview, which turns into an abusive argument, represents an inter-ethnic encounter between two people with radically different ethnic, communicative and cultural backgrounds and value-systems. What is particularly interesting about this work is Johnstone's observation that while there are cultural reasons for the two participants not understanding each other, these do not fully explain what happens in the interaction. She notes that both participants appear to be poor communicators and completely fail to come to terms with each other's different styles. She also points out that communicative behaviour is the result of people's attempts, successful or otherwise, to deal with the specific situation in which they find themselves. The choices people make will depend on the situation and the people involved in it. People adapt - or at least try to adapt - to the situation, to each other, and success or failure is always the result of situated action and human intention. Thus, in this case, Fallachi's well-documented combative interview style may well have actively helped develop the curtailing and subsequent demise of the encounter.

Johnstone (1986) and Gumperz (1982) are noteworthy for stressing the emergent, dynamic nature of interaction in intercultural encounters. Communicative patterns or styles cannot be seen as a priori categories which determine choices and outcomes in interaction, but interactions are jointly created by participants who are to varying extents aware of each other's intentions and who have to continuously negotiate, modify and evaluate their interpretations in the course of the interaction process.

Compromise is of course a necessity in any attempt to unravel interculturalism. Agar (1992:6) suggests that 'the confusion over the term culture comes from the confusion over how the world works now... economic migration and war and tourism, information and transportation, global identities embedded in transnational institutions dealing with business, academics, politics (mean that) we're all being a little of this and a little of that'. If we accept this and the premise that culture is not something that people possess but which they employ to fill the spaces between them, then we are on the way to

examining the individual as the harbinger of culture and the situation in which the individual communicates with others as the focal point for examining intercultural communication. By placing the individual as pre-eminent in our enquiry so can we acknowledge the slippery nature of the terms used here and possibly avoid the definitional chaos that they pose.

As researchers and/or trainers in this area, we are faced with the following dilemma: on the one hand we must deal with and explain systematic intercultural differences. Such differences have been found to be reflected on all levels of language use and to be learned early in life, thus becoming unconscious and difficult to change. They have their origins in long-established historical traditions and are maintained through networks of interpersonal relationships and, in intercultural encounters, can result in miscommunication.

On the other hand, we have to study each interaction as a separate achievement on its own, and take into account the particular participants, their background, their current state of mind, attitudes towards each other and willingness and ability to co-operate in the particular interaction. At the same time we should bear in mind the multiplicity of other situation-specific factors which affect the communication process.

In handling this dilemma it is possible to consider the notion of situational adaptability as offering a means by which to raise the level of intercultural communication to a higher level of empirical validation and relevance to real people in a real world. By such an approach we may be able to see the individual persona as it is realized in the ever-changing circumstances of social interaction. Thus, whilst emphasizing the inseparability of language, communication and culture, it is possible to lay stress on the dynamism and realisation of human interaction, which in intercultural communications needs to be more generally understood on a 'non-maximalist' level.

One aspect of situational adaptability deserves special mention in this penultimate paragraph, namely, mutual accommodation. What happens when people of different

cultures and languages come together has been popularised in relation to problems and culture-clash reportedly due to use of different cultural-bound communication styles. What has not been considered is the extent to which people actively engage in mutual accommodation of each other as separate people, regardless of culture, ethnicity, sex, or other factors. Thus, an approach to intercultural communication which specifically examines success factors in intercultural communication as pertaining to situational parameters is both overdue and promising.

Finally, it is worth considering the equation B = f (PxE), namely, that behaviour is a function of both person and environmental variables. Those engaged in enquiry on intercultural communication who ignore the P variable increasingly do so at their peril.

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